

## **Good Governance through ICT Enabled Public Service Delivery in West Bengal: A Micro Level Study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The concept of governance has received considerable attention in academic discourse since the late 1980s mainly under the influence of the neo-liberals. The advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has added new impetus to the shift. Because, by using ICT government can not only deliver a package with efficiency, time bounding, cost-effective, and client-oriented service to the citizens but also can achieve the ideal purpose of good governance. To achieve the basic principles of good governance, the Government of India has introduced various electronic- governance projects at different levels of governance, e-district project is one of them. The main objective of the present study is to assess e-governance services delivering through the e-district project from a good governance perspective. The study, based on the survey data in one district of West Bengal, also tries to identify key challenges of these projects and also to suggest avenues for better performance.

**KEYWORDS:** Governance; Information and communication technology; Good Governance; E-Governance, E-District.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Effecting good governance is arguably the contemporary fad of the developing countries. The World Bank has described governance as 'the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development'. But, there is no clear definition of good governance as such. The concept good governance is rather an ideal- typical construct which provides certain parameters to evaluate governance process. According to UNESCAP (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), there are eight principles of good governance, i.e. participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus, equity and inclusiveness, effectiveness and accountability. So, good governance signifies a participative manner of governing that functions in a responsible, accountable, and transparent manner based on the principles of efficiency, legitimacy, and consensus for the purpose of promoting the rights of individual citizens and the public interest, thus indicating the existence of a political will for ensuring the welfare of society and sustainable development with social justice (Munshi, 2000).

To achieve the basic principles of good governance, a large of number of countries around the world have introduced various electronic-governance projects at different strata of government. The potential of e-governance to attain attributes of good governance is well recognised across the globe. Several studies suggesting that ICT can be used in diverse applications to accelerate information dissemination, improve efficiency of public services, increase the transparency and accountability of government administration to reduce corruption and facilitate citizen participation in governance process (Bhatnagar, 2014). In Indian context, Tenth and Eleventh Five Year Plans viewed e-governance as a means to achieve good governance and better service delivery (GOI, 2002, 2007). Electronic-governance means use of information and communication technology to improve information and service delivery, encouraging citizen participation in the decision-making process of the government. If delivery of service to citizens is considered a primary function of the government, information technology has added the impetus to the services rendered by the government. Through the use of information and communication technology government can deliver a package of efficiency, time bounding, cost efficiency, and client-oriented service to the citizens. Moreover, ICTs can enable citizens to utilize their grievances online and also help government to get feedback on their policies and actions. In a broader sense, apart from delivering government services, e-governance includes integration of several stand-alone systems and services between Government to Citizen (G2C), Government to Business(G2B), Government to Government (G2G) as well as back office processes and interactions within the entire government framework (Sapru & Sapru, 2014). The public service delivery mechanism in the developing countries like India used to cost too much, deliver too little and had not been sufficiently responsive or accountable(Malik *et al.*,2014). E-

governance reforms aim to revamp the delivery system. E-governance offers a new way forward, by increasing the pace of government processes, helps to connect citizens and build interactions with and within civil society (Kalsi and Kiran, 2015). Thus, e-governance is all about reform in governance facilitated by the innovative and extensive use of ICT.

E-governance involves the use of ICTs to transact the business of government (Heeks, 2001). Researches on e-governance initiatives have highlighted the importance of such initiatives not only in the domain of public service delivery but also in the governance process as a whole. Richard Heeks (2001) studied the effect of information and communication technology (ICT) and how it can make a significant contribution to the accomplishment of good governance goals. This line of thought was further expounded by other studies (Basu, 2004, Kalsi, *et al.*, 2009, Salam, 2017). It acknowledges that e-governance initiatives have a direct impact on citizens, in which the citizens derive benefit through direct transactions with governmental services.

E-governance has been one of the strategic public reforms in India since late 1990's under the rubric of good governance agenda promoted by international organisations. Chaudhuri (2017) has attempted critical appraisal of the e-governance reforms in India. Employing interdisciplinary methodology, she presents a qualitative account of the policies and practices of e-governance reform in India along with a detailed case study of the Common Service Centres (CSCs) scheme under the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP). Her study has focussed on the relationship between technology and governance and how its changes the interaction way of and between state-citizen.

The e-District project is one of the core element of NeGP, whose main aim is to 'making all public services accessible to the common man in his locality, through common service delivery outlets and ensure efficiency, transparency and reliability of such services at a affordable cost to realize the basic needs of the common man'(NeGP, 2006). This project has been implemented in almost every state of India and people are getting services of various department facilities from a single-window based portal. Sarmah (2015) affirms that e-districts project in the state of Assam has efficiently delivering public services to its citizens and the efficiency of the e-district portal is very high. Another relevant contribution regarding the e-District Project in West Bengal has been made by Sanyal *et al.* (2014). He provides a prime picture of the e-district project implemented in the state of West Bengal, the nature and quality of its services, citizen's satisfaction, etc. The study has also explored different critical factors involved with the citizen's satisfaction and contributing to citizen's behavioural change towards acceptance of the e-District project. In addition, Pandey (2018) has developed a practical model based on adaptive governance literature for the context of the national e-district plan of the Government of India. He provides an architectural view of the e-district project i.e. role of different agencies, the authenticity of the citizen's information, service guarantee mechanism, service delivery channel, revenue model, etc.

Several studies have been done on good governance and different aspects of e-governance, but work on a particular e-governance project from service receivers or citizens' perspective has been ignored. Present study tries to fill up this gap by evaluating citizens' perception about the e-service delivery system. This study also examines whether e-governance is able to provide public services in a corruption-free, transparent, accountable and more effective way, which will ultimately ensure good governance.

## **II. E-District Project- at a glance**

The Government of India (GOI) has acknowledged the importance of e-governance in achieving good governance and has announced the National e- Governance plan (NeGP) for the country in 2006. The plan comprised 27 Mission Mode Projects (MMPs) under different categories; e-District project is one of them. It is a state mission mode project with the objective of making the government's services available to the common citizen through a computerised system. The major objectives of the e-District Mission Mode Project are to ensure the following:

- Undertakes backend computerization of District and Tehsil level offices to ensure electronic delivery of high-volume citizen centric services at the district level.
- Efficient delivery of services with improved service levels by undertaking extensive business process re-engineering of identified services.
- Extensive capacity building and training of field level functionaries to ensure smooth migration to electronic delivery of e-district services and phasing out manual delivery of services.
- Delivery of services through common service centres (CSCs) by leveraging the common infrastructure of SWAN, SDC, and SSDG.
- Delivery of all public services at district/sub-district level in electronic form through state portals by using the state service delivery gateways.
- Providing easy, anywhere and anytime access to government services (Information & Transaction) to ensure reliability, efficiency, transparency and accountability.

- Reducing number of visits of citizens to a government office/ department for availing the services and thereby eliminating harassment.
- Reducing administrative burden and service fulfilment time and costs for the government, citizen and business.
- Reducing direct interaction of citizen with the government and encourage 'e'- interaction and efficient communication through portal.
- Enhancing perception and image of the government and its constituent departments.

Like other states in India, Government of West Bengal has initiated the e-District project in all the districts of the state. The architecture of the e-District portal in West Bengal has been built with three main pillars – State Wide Area Network (SWAN), Common Service Center (CSC) and State Data Center (SDC). The Webel Technology Limited (WTL) under the administrative control of Department of Information Technology and Electronics, Government of West Bengal is involved in successful implementation of West Bengal e-District project as Nodal Agency and is authorised as State Implementing Agency (SIA) for Government of West Bengal.

At present, following G2C services are available through e-District Portal:

- Certificates: Income Certificate, Local Residence (Domicile) Certificate, Ordinary Residential Certificate, Delayed Birth Registration Certificate, Delayed Death Registration Certificate, Distance Certificate for Students, etc.
- Registration of Societies: Registration of Firms, Societies and Non-trading Corporations, Annual filing of Returns, Entry of Records of Registration of Societies, Amendment of Signatories of Societies, etc.
- Licenses: Blasting License, Fatka / Fire Cracker License, Fire Arms License, Renewal of these certificates, etc.
- RTI (Right to Information) Services: RTI, Public Grievance.
- Labour: Building and other construction workers beneficiary registration, Transport workers beneficiary registration, Registration of shops and other establishments, Renewal of all these registrations etc.
- UD & MA: Sanction of industrial building plan in municipal area, Sanction of water connection for industrial area, trade license for municipal area, etc.

### **III. FUNCTIONAL NETWORK OF E-DISTRICT PORTAL**

The services offered through this portal may be availed of through the internet or by visiting any Common Service Center (CSC), which is commonly known as *Tathyamitra Kendra* (Information Center) or a kiosk. CSCs are operating throughout the state. Citizens do not need to go to any government office for submitting the application, inquiring about status or receiving a certificate. Various forms for the above-mentioned services are available in the e-district portal. To avail any service, one must have a mobile number, so that submission of application and status of it can be sent and an inquiry officer can communicate with applicants, if required. The portal also offers an application status tracking facility along with the verification stage. To access any service common citizen are to attend CSC/ kiosk for submitting an application through this portal. After reaching CSC/Kiosks and making request for service CSC/Kiosk operators will fill up all the necessary information required for the service and attach all required documents with the application after scanning all hard copy documents in digital format. After that, CSC/Kiosk operators will submit and forward the application to designate authority for approval and print out a submission received copy with a unique ID for future reference.

The designated authority by using his/her login in e-district portal can see all the applications and do the review and necessary actions. If and when the inquiry officer is satisfied with the application after reviewing the information provided for specific service, the officer will forward it to the final authority for approval. In case any fault in an application is detected, the applicant will be so informed through the message. After completion of this phase, one e-notice will be generated and communicated to the applicant and CSC/Kiosk operator for notification. In final phase, CSC/Kiosk operators will log in to the e-District portal to take the final print out of the certificate. The certificates are digital, they carry a digital signature and barcode for verification. Through this barcode, the originality of a certificate can be ascertained. A certificate generated through this portal carries details of the applicant, his/her photo, signature, purpose of issuing the certificate, and the validity of the certificate.

If we focus attention on the progress of this project, it is seen that the e-District project is successfully running in each and every sub-divisions of the Cooch Behar district. By September 2020, a total of 10489928 applications have been received through this portal and 9431664 certificates have been generated and delivered to the citizens all over the state. The Cooch Behar district is one of the top performing districts in e-governance arena and by September 2020, district administration has received a total of 69453 applications and 50804 certificates have been generated and delivered to its citizens. The increasing number of applications in the dashboard of the e-District portal attests the utility and popularity of this project.

#### **IV. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

On the background as delineated, the present article intends:

1. To examine the level of awareness and usages patterns of e-governance services.
2. To analyse the operation and efficiency of the e-District project in delivering public services from good governance perspective.
3. To examine whether e-governance has made government administration more accountable, efficient, transparent, responsive one to ensure good governance and
4. To identify key challenges of these projects and also to suggest avenues for better performance.

#### **V. METHODOLOGY**

This is an empirical study and observations as well as survey method have been used to evaluate the efficiency of this project. The primary data have been collected from field survey by using direct interview method through schedules, which consisted of both open and closed ended questions. Secondary data have been gathered through content analysis from books, research articles, various government reports, and webpages.

Field survey has been conducted at Cooch Behar district of West Bengal. Cooch Behar is one of the backward districts of the state and is divided into five subdivisions namely- Cooch Behar Sadar (District Headquarters), Dinhata, Mathabhanga, Mekhliganj and Tufanganj. The total 200 sample has been taken for this study. The researcher has taken an equal number of respondents from every sub-division of the district and personally visited the field and interviewed the people. For respondent's selection, snowball sampling method has been followed.

#### **VI. Findings and Discussion**

As ICT enabled public service delivery system is an integral part of e-governance, hence the findings are analysed through the lenses of e-governance. The findings of the study are as follows:

##### **Awareness**

- It was observed that 65 percent of respondents are aware of e-governance initiatives whereas 35 percent are unaware of e-governance initiatives in the district. The ratio between awareness and unawareness is 65:35. Apart from this statistical dimension, it has been observed that respondents are not only unaware about this portal, but they are more or less unaware about today's digital world. Very poor knowledge has been observed about information and communication technology and how it works. They called this portal based service delivery mechanism simply as 'internet service' or 'internet certificate'. Many of them are not interested about the project or portal, how it works, they just looked only for the fulfilment of their personal requirements.

##### **Mode of Publicity**

- The main source of awareness among respondents of the district is from government office. According to survey data 52 percent of respondents became aware of e-governance services from government office, for 18 percent of respondents the source of awareness is friends/ colleagues, 16 percent from relatives/neighbours, and 14 percent from others like social media, YouTube, etc. The survey also reveals the fact that the departmental officials have been playing noteworthy role in creating public awareness.

##### **Sources of availing e-governance services**

The sources of availing e-governance service through which citizens access these services are multiple. Maximum number of sampled population (90%) used the Common Service Center (CSCs) in availing e-governance service whereas 8 percent of respondents used kiosks. Only 2 percent of respondents availed e-governance services by using the internet at the office.

##### **Effectiveness and efficiency**

- Effectiveness and efficiency as it applies to good governance theory means the process and institutions produce results that meet needs using the resources available. Researcher has carried a comparative analysis in between the e-governance system and manual system to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the e-District project in public service delivery system in terms of average time, effort, and money required to avail service, number of visits, and volume of paperwork and rate of errors in documents. The survey data show that out of 200 respondents 178 respondents expressed that the e-governance system is more effective than the manual system of public service delivery. Only 22 respondents have given a negative response. During the interview period, they opined that they are not competent in modern information and communication technology. Due to incompetency in ICTs they preferred the manual system of public service delivery.

### **Accountability**

- Interpreting the data of field survey it is found that maximum (78%) number of respondents has opined that e-governance has increased the accountability of administration in public service delivery system. According to their view as the portal contains a tracking facility of application the inquiry office could not delay the process and once application is verified for final approval, there is no delay at the approval end. However, few respondents (22%) expressed that relatively there is no substantial change in the incidence of accountability of administration.

### **Transparency**

- Transparency is another key determinant of good governance. The e-governance has increased the transparency in public service delivery mechanisms. According to the (83%) respondents' view e-governance has made the full process of service delivery more transparent than previous system i.e. manual system. This process made easy availability and accessibility of data related to public services, clarity of rules and procedures, and an applicant can trace his/her application, and easily get certificate by login into the portal. All these make administration more transparent and as a result, scope of bribery has been reduced significantly.

### **Responsiveness**

- Responsiveness indicates that the institutions and processes try to serve all stakeholders. In any service delivery system, officials or functionaries must respond to the demands and needs of the citizens. By using ICT, the administration can give a quick response to the applicant's needs and demands. The survey analysis reveals that e-governance has increased the responsiveness of administration in the public service delivery system. Because 76% respondents have given positive response in this regard.

### **Flow of Information**

- Maximum numbers (87%) of respondents expressed that e-governance has made easy access to information about government decisions, actions, etc. E-governance allows seamless access of information and established an integration channel among various departments of the government administration. This integrated channel not only made possible to deliver information and services through a single portal but also helps the administration to do their duty in the easiest way.

### **Less corruption**

- From the survey data it is clear that maximum number of respondents (81%) opined that e-governance is playing a crucial role in eliminating corruption in public service delivery process. According to their view, in the e-governance process technology is acting as a mediator between the service giver and service receiver and there is no need to contact directly to public officials for any service. As a result direct contacts between the public officials and the citizens have been reduced significantly. Hence, all sorts of corrupt practices are decreasing day by day.

### **Easy access of Public services**

- The findings reveal that e-governance has made easy access to public services for the citizens. In this process, a citizen can access any public service anytime from anywhere. As a result, the utility of public services has been increased.

## **VII. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

From the study, it is evinced that e-governance has a significant role not only in delivering public services to the common citizens in time-bounding, transparent, accountable, cost-effective and more efficient way but also achieve the purpose of good governance. Before the e-district project was launched in West Bengal, citizens had to travel to the block or sub-divisional offices to avail ordinary services like certificates for income, domicile etc, where they had to pay bribes, wait indefinite time for the service. That system was costly as well as time and energy consuming. Now, citizens do not need to visit any government office to avail any service and to wait ad infinitum. Through this portal citizen can avail specified public services from anywhere and anytime. Hence, e-district project can be looked at as an efficient tool to deliver quick services to the citizens. Government departments also increase their efficiency by providing seamless services to the people easily through the electronic medium.

However, the e-District projects sometimes fumble to achieve its goals due to lack of awareness among citizens, poor internet connectivity and infrastructure in rural areas and sometimes due to apathy of the officials to function professionally. Besides, the dearth of power supply, resistance to change, and shortage of ICT trained manpower and poor data securities are some other persisting problems. To make the project more successful and better performing following points need due consideration.

**First,** The government should organise awareness programme on information and communication technology and e-governance applications for citizens. To create awareness among citizens the government can use mass media viz. television, newspapers, as well as social media like Facebook, WhatsApp etc.

**Second,** The government should organise training programme on ICT and e-governance applications for government's employees as well as CSC/Kiosks operators on a regular basis.

**Third,** For easy access of the internet facility government should invest more and set up enough infrastructures in rural areas.

**Forth,** The government should manage and update content on government websites efficiently and regularly and local language can be used to the extent possible.

**Fifth,** The government should encourage local youth to establish CSC/Kiosks and use e-governance applications. Without CSC/Kiosks' availability, e-governance services may not be able to reach to the target population easily.

**Sixth,** The government should encourage its employees to use e-governance applications and interact with citizens through the electronic medium.

**Seventh,** The government should launch compulsory ICT learning programme at school level curricula.

**Eight,** The government should create a monitoring committee to meet with service receivers and analysis their feedbacks on a regular basis and update the process accordingly.

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